DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 633 CS 011 131

AUTHOR Elster, Charles A.; Moje, Elizabeth B.
TITLE Literacy and Diversity: Do We Need Dichotomies or Not?
PUB DATE Dec 92
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (42nd, San Antonio, TX, December 2-5, 1992).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Differences; Ethnography; *Literacy; Perspective Taking; Teacher Student Relationship; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; *Dichotomies; *Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

Theorists, researchers, and practitioners need to develop a better awareness of the oppressive nature of dichotomies in literacy research and practice and work to use dichotomies profitably by moving beyond them. Dichotomies can be convenient generalizations which make communication possible, but they run the risk of creating warring camps of opponents who berate each other in different languages. Dichotomous depictions of literacy, language, and culture are popular and well institutionalized; however, the use of such dichotomies fosters a limited view of "reality," leads to repression of individual and community expression and needs, promotes cultural bias, creates exclusive discourse that stifles dialogue, and prohibits critical analysis. Three possibilities for transforming dichotomies exist: mitigate the opposition created by dichotomies using a continuum model; emphasize pluralism in the place of dichotomies; and reformulate the problem. One method of promoting dialogue from multiple perspectives involves using ethnography as a teaching and learning tool. Another method of working profitably with dichotomies is that of using dialectical processes of "methodological doubt" and "methodological belief." Literacy educators need to construct new visions of literacy teaching and learning, ones that value multiple perspectives and approaches. (Forty-two references are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED352633

Charles A. Elster & Elizabeth B. Moje
Purdue University

LITERACY AND DIVERSITY: DO WE NEED DICHOTOMIES OR NOT?

Charles Elster
School of Education
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN 47907

(317) 494-6056

Running Head: Dichotomies

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Charles A. Elster
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS011131

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

LITERACY AND DIVERSITY: DO WE NEED DICHOTOMIES OR NOT?

Interior Minister of Lilliput: But you're a Giant!
A monster sent by our enemies to destroy us!
Gulliver: I'm not your enemy; I'm just different. . . .
Minister: Different! That makes you an enemy!
Gulliver: No, I'm different from you and you are different from me. So you see, we're both the same. That makes us equal.
(The Three Worlds of Gulliver, cited in Wilden, 1980, p. xlix)

Methods and purposes of education are a frequent subject of debate among professional and lay members of society. These debates, particularly debates about methods of teaching literacy and language skills, often promulgate polarized positions based on dichotomous categories, for example subskills versus holistic approaches (Pearson, 1989), direct versus implicit approaches (Delpit, 1988) and process versus product approaches (Graves, 1983; Hawisher, 1990; Ronald & Roskelly, 1990).

Delpit's (1988) argument that "process" approaches to literacy education foster the oppression of non-mainstream students highlights the dangers of dichotomous thinking. Delpit uses a number of dichotomies to bolster her argument: process versus product approaches, implicit versus direct instruction, mainstream versus non-mainstream students, and the culture of power versus the culture of the oppressed. Although Delpit raises important issues regarding equity and education, we are uneasy with her dichotomies on two counts. First, is she fair in using different dichotomies interchangeably? Is "a process approach to learning" synonymous with "implicit" or "indirect" instruction"? Second, is the use of such dichotomies not in itself misleading? Is every person definitively in or out of the "culture of power"? Are all members of that culture members equally? Are all non-members non-members equally?

In this theoretical paper, we focus on issues of literacy and language learning among diverse populations of students,

exploring the current use of dichotomous theoretical frameworks, and suggesting ways to transcend the dichotomies that may stifle progress in theory, research, and practice. Finally, we hope to encourage dialogue about the effect of dichotomous thinking on progress in the education of diverse populations.

Defining Dichotomies

Making dichotomies is a process of binary or oppositional naming. Like all naming, it has its values and dangers. In "Fumes the Memorious" (1964), Jorge Luis Borges describes a man with a prodigious memory who has trouble understanding why a dog seen from the front at three o'clock should have the same name as a dog seen from the side at six o'clock. Names, and dichotomies, are convenient generalizations which make communication possible.

However, when dichotomies become oppositional, they run the risk of becoming "killer dichotomies" (Berthoff, 1990) which create warring camps of opponents who berate each other in different languages. In literacy research and practice, the history of "great debates" has been a history of opposition: oral and silent reading, whole word and phonics methods, and most recently, between whole language and subskills approaches (Chall & Goodman, 1992). Literacy theorists and policy makers have traditionally used dichotomous definitions to distinguish literate from illiterate adults, young non-readers from readers, and normal from learning disabled students. In bilingual and bidialectic education, debates abound between "English-only" and "English-plus" perspectives (McGroarty, 1992), and between approaches which stress standard English and those which accommodate to non-standard English speakers (Labov, 1969). In classrooms at all levels, oppositions are set up between teacher and student roles, right and wrong answers, passing and failing, competence and incompetence. Finally, student populations have been categorized

using dichotomies according to cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic factors (majority and minority, white and non-white, advantaged and disadvantaged, mainstream and non-mainstream), and ability and competency levels (gifted and regular, disabled and regular, developmental and remedial students).

The Consequences of Dichotomies

Dichotomous depictions of literacy, language, and culture are popular and well institutionalized; however, the use of such dichotomies fosters a limited view of "reality," leads to repression of individual and community expression and needs, promotes cultural bias, creates exclusive discourse that stifles dialogue, and prohibits critical analysis. These limitations combine to stifle "inspired teaching" (Duffy, 1992) and to hinder progress in the education of diverse groups in our society.

First, the dichotomies represented by these depictions are false; dichotomies do not exist in "reality" or in nature (Berthoff, 1990). Rather, dichotomous thinking is part of the epistemological underpinnings of Western culture (Wilden, 1980), codified in Aristotle's Laws of Contradiction and the Excluded Middle (Wolf, 1988), Descartes' mind/body dualisms, and the structuralism of Levi-Strauss and de Saussure. Dichotomies can mask differences that exist within groups. For example, it is unlikely that all teachers who profess to use "holistic" methods do so in the same manner (Cohen, 1992). Nor is it wise to assume that all members of a culture, mainstream or non-mainstream, share similar goals and beliefs (Ellsworth, 1989). Such depictions assume an underlying conformity which represses individual freedom and humanization as people are pressured to identify with one group or another (Freire, 1973).

Furthermore, these dichotomies, particularly cultural dichotomies, represent a biased belief that some groups are

deprived in their language (Bernstein, 1970), their ability to be literate, and their capacity for abstract thinking (Olson, 1977; Ong, 1982). Dichotomous views of cultural groups can result in perceptions of one group's culture as more valuable than another for the development of literacy (e.g., Hirsch, 1980). Cultural customs are often interpreted negatively and viewed as deprivations because they are measured against one cultural norm (Scollon, 1984). Terms such as minority, disadvantaged, and handicapped imply a difference that deprives children of equal status in both school and society. Literacy programs established to minimize differences in children's abilities, such as Head Start and Chapter One, often operate from a deficit or deprivation view (Pellegrini, 1991; Rose, 1988). As long as the dichotomous "mainstream/non-mainstream" view exists, differences will be approached as deficits (Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991).

Dichotomous approaches to literacy, language, and culture also discourage an open dialogue about issues of diversity. Instead, these polarized views shape exclusive communities that legitimize and affirm the knowledge and ideology of group members (Swearingen, 1990) and silence the voices of others (Delpit, 1986, 1988; Elbow, 1986; Ellsworth, 1989). In addition, dichotomies encourage jargon-laden discourse that stifles meaningful conversation as slogans and catch-words are tossed about in defense of a group's purpose (Liston & Zeichner, 1987). Finally, clinging to dichotomies can hamper critical analysis of one's own ideas and of new ideas (Berthoff, 1990; Elbow, 1986). Because people often define themselves by what they are not, the dual entities of dichotomy depend on each other for life and allow one group to have power over another and to become the "bearers of truth" (Hawisher, 1990, p. 16).

Ultimately, holding fast to dichotomies can become "a way of

trying to hold the world still" (Zebroski, 1990, p. 178), and stifling progress. Individuals and groups maintain power through the use of dichotomies, and those who cannot fit themselves into one side or another are left out.

Unfortunately, "killer dichotomies" continue to dominate debates in literacy research and education. In order to move beyond dichotomies, Gail Hawisher suggests,

> reform [in English education] must demonstrate a balanced perspective, a perspective that seeks not only to unite binary opposition into productive syntheses but also seeks to preserve the rich diversity of knowledge among us. (Hawisher, 1990, p. 16)

Although Hawisher's advice referred specifically to English education, her words have implications for the teaching of literacy, particularly in a time when we strive to serve the needs of our diverse students.

Transcending Dichotomies

Constructing New Visions

Because of the divisive effects of dichotomous thinking, it is important that educators develop alternative ways of dealing with issues of literacy, language, and culture. To accomplish this, we must construct new visons of literacy teaching and learning, and then develop teaching methods that allow us to enact these visions. Three possibilities for transforming dichotomies, and examples of their applications to issues of language, literacy and culture, are outlined below.

Continuum. A continuum is one model which mitigates the opposition created by dichotomies. For example, orality and literacy, usually viewed as a dichotomy (Olson, 1977; Ong, 1982), can be viewed instead as a continuum. Using a pragmatic analysis, Lakoff (1981) lays out speech and literacy events along a

continuum between poles formed by informal spoken conversation and the formal written essay. On this continuum, a personal letter, although written, is more "oral" in style than a spoken lecture. A continuous view of orality and literacy can reveal the complexity of the relations between the two. It can also become the basis for a language and literacy curriculum (e.g., Moffett, 1968).

A second example of a continuum is the concept of emergent literacy, which has superceded the reading readiness paradigm that assumes a dichotomy between young "non-readers" and "readers". From the emergent literacy perspective, young children can have many reading and writing skills and can act like readers and writers before they understand the alphabetic code. Although emergent literacy helps to remove dichotomies, there is a danger that it fails to avoid the dichotomy by defining itself in contrast to "conventional" literacy. In order to be more truly continuous, literacy can be viewed as constantly emerging in individuals and in groups. For example, new literacy technologies require the emergence of new knowledge and skills in literates of all ages.

Finally, in learning theory, Vygotsky's model of learning is based on a continuum. Dissatisfied with the opposition between measured competency and incompetency, Vygotsky (1978) developed the concept of the zone of proximal development, which redefines learning as a continuum of performance scaffolded by collaboration with adults.

Pluralism. A second approach is to emphasize pluralism in the place of dichotomies. Sulzby (1992) talks about "multiple literacies" in accounting for the range of literacy practices in the modern world. Literacy researchers have documented the multiplicity of literacy practices across social groups, challenging the unity of literacy and the dichotomy between

literate and illiterate (Heath, 1983, Scribner & Cole, 1981). This research suggests that we must be ever more particular rather than general in our characterizations of language and literacy practices.

In language and literacy research, deficit models of home language and culture, which dominated theory in the past, have been replaced with difference models (Labov, 1969; Scott, 1992), although deficit models continue to drive many educational practices. However, difference models of language and culture, like the concept of emergent literacy, can continue to promote dichotomies when "differences" continue to be measured against a single "standard" language or culture.

Re-definition. A third way to overcome dichotomies is to reformulate the problem. For example, Dyson (1988) challenges the view which equates literacy with decontextualized language, asserting that through literacy we recontextualize language in new settings. Likewise, miscue analysis (Goodman, 1976) has redefined our view of errors, going beyond computing reading accuracy to ask what errors reveal about the reading process. Following this lead, emergent literacy researchers looking at children's responses to environmental print went beyond accuracy rate to examine the quality of wrong answers (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). Finally, we can redefine the roles of teacher and student. For example, Graves (1983) urges writing teachers to write along with their students, to voice their own struggles with writing, thereby becoming students, and to allow children, through their writing, to teach what they know.

Enacting Visions of Literacy

New visions of literacy, then, involve transcending the dichotomies which limit our thoughts and actions. We need to develop strategies for theorizing, researching, and teaching that

allow us to enact the new visions of literacy that we construct. Dialogue among groups of educators is essential (Delpit, 1988; Shannon, 1990). Delpit claims that "progressive education movements" (1986) or "liberals" (1988) have silenced dialogue by refusing to listen to the views of non-mainstream educators and parents. Weiler (1991) and Ellsworth (1989) echo this concern, suggesting that movements toward critical pedagogy deny diversity and silence voices that do not sound forth similar critical goals. Through dialogue, we can critically examine the purposes and effects of promoting one method, language, or cultural group over another. However, in the attempt to look critically, we must be wary of creating new dichotomies. We must be careful to avoid assuming that others do not understand our arguments because they do not agree with them.

One method of promoting dialogue from multiple perspectives involves using ethnography as a teaching and learning tool. Traditionally, ethnography has been a mode of inquiry that seeks to uncover the particulars of cultural experience and the perspectives of participants. Ethnographic research shows the multiple facets of literacy and culture (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Taylor, 1983). However, ethnography can also be a powerful pedagogical tool (Delpit, 1988; Heath, 1983). Zebroski (1990) suggests that we incorporate ethnography into our pedagogy by collaborating with students to redraw existing boundaries between teacher and student. As a composition teacher, Zebroski has his students practice ethnographic writing as a means of studying the lives and personal perspectives of groups of people. He argues that this approach allows students to see the world in new ways, to realize the power and limits of language in describing experience, to learn unique communication strategies, and to move beyond the role of student to that of "researcher" and

"teacher." At the heart of this pedagogical use of ethnography is dialogue - between students and informants, between students and students, and between students and teachers.

Another method of working profitably with dichotomies is that of using dialectic processes of "methodological doubt" and "methodological belief" (Elbow (1986). Building on the idea that "contraries" (i.e., dichotomous views) can be used profitably, Elbow claims that suspending disbelief and entering into another's way of thinking, even temporarily, forces us to analyze our own ideas more carefully. He does not propose naive belief at the expense of critical analysis. Instead, he suggests that the two processes, belief and doubt, be used to expose, experience and examine the issues we need to confront in our theorizing and teaching.

Theorists, researchers, and practitioners need to develop a better awareness of the oppressive nature of dichotomies in our field and work to use dichotomies profitably, by moving beyond them. Our dialogue must focus on coming to know and understand the perspectives of others through frequent interaction with others. We must be cautious not to re-establish old dichotomies with new names. Finally, we need to construct new visions of literacy teaching and learning, ones that value multiple perspectives and approaches.

References

Bernstein, B. (1970). Class, codes, and control. (Vol.1). Theoretical studies towards a sociology of language. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Berthoff, A. E. (1990). Killer dichotomies: Reading in/Reading out. In K. Ronald & H. Roskelly (Eds.), Farther along: Transforming dichotomies in rhetoric and composition, pp. 12-24. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Borges, J. L. (1964). Fumes the memorious. In Labyrinths. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.

Chall, J., & Goodman, K. (1992, May). Whole language and direct instruction models: Implications for teaching reading in the schools. Forum presented at the annual meeting of the International Reading Association, Miami Beach, FL.

Cohen, D. (1992, Dec.). Reading policy. Keynote address presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Delpit, L. D. (1986). Skills and other dilemmas of a progressive Black educator. Harvard Educational Review, 56(4), 379-385.

Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Pedagogy and power in educating other people's children. Harvard Educational Review, 58(3), 280-298.

Duffy, G. G. (1992). Let's free teachers to be inspired. Phi Beta Kappan, 73(6), 442-447.

Dyson, A. H. (1988). Drawing, talking, and writing: Rethinking writing development. (Occasional Paper No.2). Center for the Study of Writing. Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Elbow, P. (1986). Embracing contraries: Explorations in learning and teaching. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering: Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. Harvard Educational Review, 59(3), 297-324.

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Continuum.

Goodman, K. S. (1976). Reading: A psycholinguistic

guessing game. In H. Singer & R. Ruddell (Eds.), Theoretical models and processes of reading. (pp. 497-508). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Graves, D. (1983). Writing: Teachers and children at work. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hawisher, G. E. (1990). Content knowledge versus process knowledge: A false dichotomy. In G. E. Hawisher & A. O. Soter (Eds.), On literacy and its teaching: Issues in English education (pp. 1-18). Albany: SUNY.

Harste, J., Woodward, V., & Burke, C. (1984). Language stories and literacy lessons. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Heath, S. B. (1983). Ways with words. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hirsch, E. D., Jr. (1980). Culture and literacy. Journal of Basic Writing, 3, 27-47.

Hull, G., Rose, M., Fraser, K. L., & Castellan, M. (1991). Remediation as social construct: Perspectives from an analysis of classroom discourse. College Composition and Communication, 42(3), 299-329.

Labov, W. (1969). The logic of non-standard English. In P. P. Giglioli (Ed.), Language and social context (pp. 179-215). Harmondsworth, England: Pelican.

Lakoff, R. (1981). Expository writing and the oral dyad as points on a communicative continuum. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley.

Liston, D. P., & Zeichner, Z. M. (1987). Critical

pedagogy and teacher education. Journal of Education, 169(3), 117-137.

McGroarty, M. (1992). The societal context of bilingual education. Educational Researcher, 21(2), 7-9.

Moffett, J. (1968). Teaching the universe of discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Olson, D. (1977). From utterance to text: The bias of language in speech and writing. Harvard Educational Review, 47(3).

Ong. W. J. (1982). Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word. New York: Methuen.

Pearson, P. D. (1990). Reading the whole language movement. The Elementary School Journal, 90(2), 231-242.

Pellegrini, A. (1991). A critique of the concept of at-risk as applied to emergent literacy. Language Arts, 68, 380-385.

Ritchie, J. (1990). Between the trenches and the ivory towers: Divisions between university professors and high school teachers. In K. Ronald & H. Roskelly (Eds.), Farther along: Transforming dichotomies in rhetoric and composition (pp. 101-121). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Rose, M. (1988). Narrowing the mind and page: Remedial writers and cognitive reductionism. College Composition and Communication, 39(2), 267-302.

Scollon, R. (1988). Storytelling, reading, and the micropolitics of literacy. In J. E. Readence & R. S. Baldwin (Eds.), Dialogues in literacy research. Thirty-seventh Yearbook of the National Reading Conference (pp. 15-32). Chicago: National Reading

Conference.

Scott, J. C. (1992). Deficit theories, ethinc dialects, and literacy research: When and why recycling is not cost efficient. In C. Kinzer & D. Leu (Eds.), Literacy research, theory and practice: Views from many perspectives. Forty-first Yearbook of the National Reading Conference, (pp. 49-63). Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.

Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). The psychology of literacy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Shannon, P. (1990). The struggle to continue: Progressive reading instruction in the United States. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Sulzby, E. (1992). Reading in the home and preschool: An emergent literacy perspective. Paper presented at National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Swearingen, C. J. (1990). Bloomsday: Doomsday book for literacy? In A. A. Lunsford, H. Moglen, & J. Slevin (Eds.), The right to literacy, pp. 215-224.

Taylor, D. (1983). Family literacy. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard. Weiler, K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. Harvard Educational Review, 61(4), 449-474.

Wilden, A. (1980). System and structure: Essays in communication and exchange (2nd ed.). New York: Tavistock Publications.

Wolf, F. A. (1981). Taking a quantum leap. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.

Zebroski, J. T. (1990). Rewriting composition as a

postmodern discipline: Transforming the research/teaching dichotomy. In K. Ronald & H. Roskelly (Eds.), Farther along: Transforming dichotomies in rhetoric and composition (pp. 168-182). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.